

Stuck in the Mud

Imagine you are a farmer with a cotton crop ready for market. It has been raining for two weeks, and the only road between you and town is a deeply rutted, soupy mess. That often was the reality for Texas farmers before 1949.

In the late 1930s, the Texas Highway Department started paving the dirt roads between farms and the towns where they sold their goods. In 1949, the state government boosted these efforts with the Colson-Briscoe Act, setting aside \$15 million a year of state funds to construct roads that would “get the farmer out of the mud.”



In 1945 this was a muddy road in Leon County. Now it is FM 542. Courtesy TxDOT

By 1957, the farm-to-market (FM) road system was 30,000 miles long. It increased to 50,000 miles by 1962. By 1989, Texas boasted the most extensive network of secondary roads in the world. Today, farm-to-market roads account for over half of the Texas highway system.

Lumber to Market Road?

Lumber companies in east Texas were actually the first industry to benefit from the farm-to-market system. At the request of the Temple Lumber Company in Pineland, the Texas Highway Department built FM1 in 1941 as the first certified, paved two lane farm-to-market road.



Courtesy Formulano

A Woman Got Texans Out of the Mud

In 1949, State Senator Esther Neveille Colson, a legislator representing many rural towns in east-central Texas, sponsored the Colson-Briscoe Act, assuring the success of the farm-to-market road system. It was her goal to move farmers, rural school transportation, and mail delivery “out of the mud,” as she put it. The bill established and guaranteed permanent state funding to connect rural Texas to urban markets.



Courtesy Texas State Preservation Board

But I Live on a Ranch

Originally all roads in the farm-to-market system were farm roads. In 1942, the Texas Highway Department agreed to designate between farm roads and ranch roads after several ranchers complained that they didn’t live on farms. U.S. 281 marks the dividing line between Farm-to-Market (FM) roads and Ranch-to-Market (RM) roads. Generally speaking (because there are multiple exceptions), agricultural roads east of U.S. 281 are designated FM, while those to the west are marked RM.



Courtesy TxDOT

Serving More Than Just Agriculture

The 1940 census reported that 54.6 percent of the state’s population lived in rural areas. To address the needs of rural Texans, the highway department set forth an ambitious program of farm-to-market road construction. While the primary purpose of the FM road system was to improve rural-to-urban access for market goods, it also improved rural mail delivery, school bus routes, and emergency truck routes.



Courtesy TxDOT